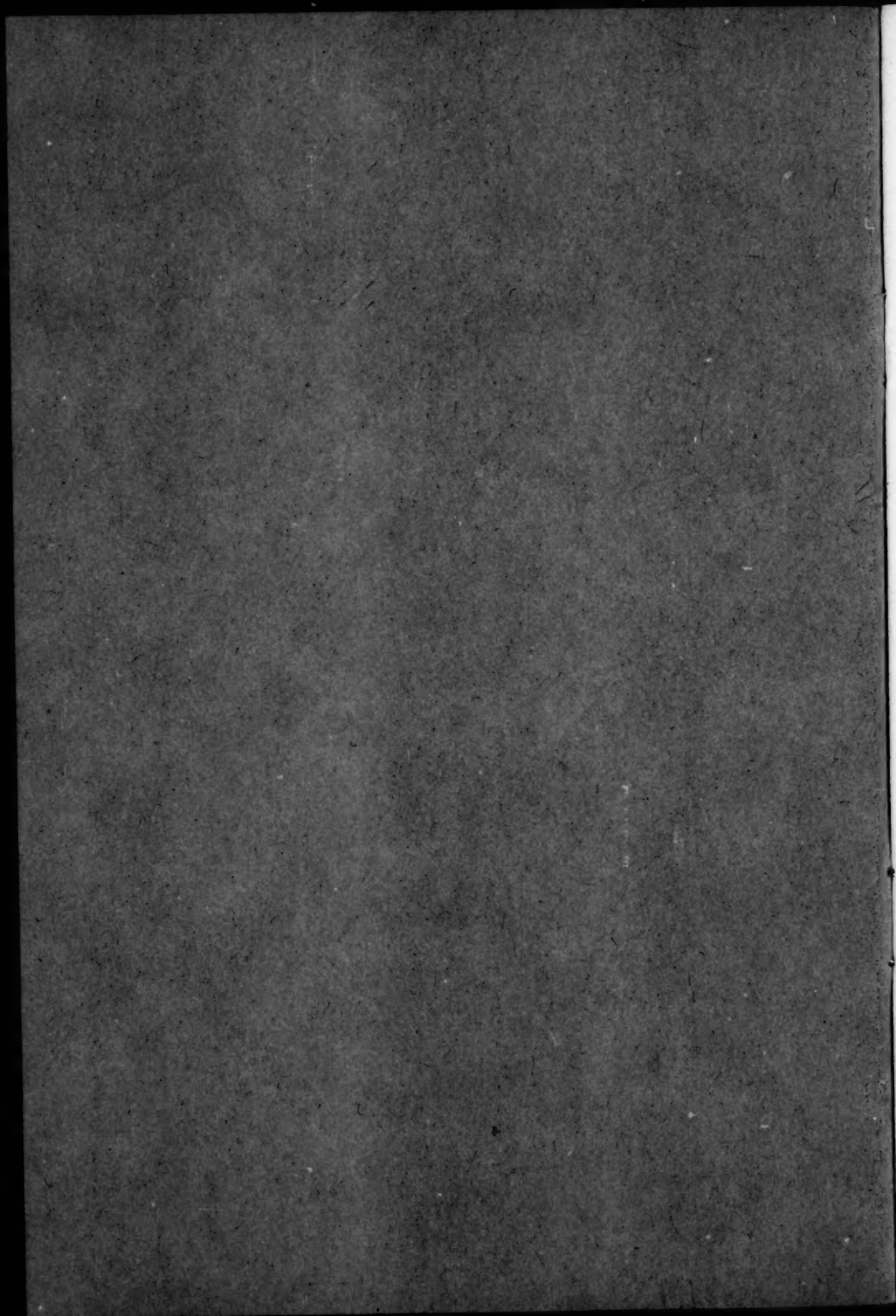


PRIMITIVE MAN

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INCEST PROHIBITIONS IN PRIMITIVE CULTURE

REV. JOHN M. COOPER
The Catholic University of America

ANTHROPOLOGY is interested in our contemporary Occidental culture as well as in the cultures of past times and of peoples other than our own. Moreover, the institutions and customs of our own culture often throw light upon those of other cultures of the past and present, and vice versa. In attempting this brief outline of the problem of near-kin marriage, we shall begin with the incest prohibition as it exists and has existed in our Western culture, with special emphasis on the factors that have given rise to it and on the grounds presented in its support. Throughout the present paper we shall use the term "grounds" to denote the reasons advanced for or against the desirability of restrictions on near-kin marriage; the term "factors" to denote the causes or influences that have actually brought about and maintained such restrictions.

The prohibition of near-kin marriage in primitive Christian culture harks back in the main to such prohibition as obtained in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. Christian practice in the first three centuries was largely moulded on current Jewish and Greco-Roman practice, although particularly from the fourth century on, very appreciable changes began to make their appearance—changes

wrought, it seems, partly by the Christian outlook itself, partly by customs and conditions prevalent among the barbarian peoples who flocked into the Church.

The grounds on which an accepted practice are defended are of course not necessarily identical with the factors which have led to the establishment, maintenance, or development of the practice. In the question we are discussing, it is very difficult to determine, from the relatively meager historical evidence available, just how far in our western civilization the grounds of defence have been determining factors as well. We seem justified, however, in concluding that such grounds have had appreciable influence, in varying measure, if not in introducing the custom, at least in maintaining and developing it. Let us turn to these grounds.

Apparently the earliest as well as the most constant ground advanced in our Occidental culture is that of the reverence due to near kin, the Roman *respectus parentelae*, and that of the reserve, *verecundia*, and *pudor* that should prevail. This may have been an underlying ground in pre-Christian Jewish legislation on the matter; it is clearly the one back of the later Roman concept that consanguineous marriages are against the "law of nature". This note consistently recurs in the early and mediaeval Christian patristic and canonical literature, and persists unbrokenly almost up to the present day in legal as well as in religious and ethical literature.

A second ground makes its first appearance in Christian literature, so far as the present writer has been able to discover, with St. John Chrysostom around the end of the fourth century and with St. Augustine in the second decade of the fifth century, although the germ idea is found three or four centuries earlier in Plutarch and Philo Judaeus. St. Augustine closely links up the prohibition with the Christian ideal of charity and emphasizes the social aspects of the usage. His reasoning may be summarized as follows: Close inbreeding leads to narrow clannishness among families; outbreeding leads to an extension of love outside the kinship circle and multiplies the social bonds that tie together in charity and unity the many kinship groups that make up the civic community.

Eight centuries later a third ground is, for the first time explicitly in Christian literature, brought forward by St. Thomas, and from his time on has been consistently emphasized, by both ecclesiastical and other writers. Near relatives of both sexes customarily live

and are reared together in close physical proximity and promiscuity, within the family circle under the same roof, and even within the wider kinship circle. Were it not for the rigid prohibition of all thought of marriage and sexual commerce between blood kin—and even between in-laws so living together—grave immorality would find entrance into the very precincts of the home.

While this ground first finds expanded expression among Christian sources in St. Thomas, the germ of the idea occurs as far back as St. Ambrose, although we have not found it in any other Christian source between St. Ambrose' time and that of St. Thomas. St. Ambrose calls attention to the kisses customary in Roman usage between near kin and then goes on to say that if marriage between such near kin—he has in mind particularly a proposed marriage between Paternus' son and his daughter's daughter—"you will render suspect this innocent kiss of familial affection." St. Thomas, however, almost certainly derived this argument from a Jewish source, Moses Maimonides (twelfth century), who in turn very probably got it from an earlier Jewish source, Saadja (tenth century). The idea is also quite definitely expressed by Philo Judaeus.

The fourth ground, that of supposed sterility of mates or of injury to offspring resulting from consanguineous marriages, has seemingly been stressed in our Western culture only since the seventeenth and, in consistent measure, only since the early or middle nineteenth century. So far as Catholic ecclesiastical literature is concerned, the earliest modern record I have found is in de Maistre (1817.) Representative ecclesiastical writers like Sanchez and Billuart, and other writers like Montesquieu and Hume, in reviewing the grounds for the prohibition, make no mention at all of this ground. For the last three quarters of a century, the biological ground recurs commonly, but by no means consistently, in the canonical and ethical writers. So far as these writers are concerned, it appears pretty clear, from the sources they cite, that their views have been taken over from scientists' conclusions widely held prior to and since the rise of Mendelian genetics.

The letter to St. Augustine of England ascribed by some to Pope Gregory the Great,—but the authenticity of which is far from being above suspicion,—while adducing *respectus parentelae* and

Old Testament legislation as grounds for the prohibition of near-kin marriage, also says: "We have learned from experience that from such a marriage [of first cousins] offspring cannot come [*succrescere*: may also mean, 'grow up', 'thrive']". This letter is frequently cited in subsequent sources, but without comment on this particular passage in it. One cannot well help concluding that those who cite the passage are not very much impressed by it, or that at least they are cognizant of no information of their own that confirms such a biological assertion.

St. Anselm must have been quite unaware of any such supposed resulting sterility, else he would almost certainly have mentioned it in his attempt to outline the grounds for near-kin prohibition. St. Thomas in one instance in his Commentary on The Sentences, cites the passage, from Peter Lombard's Sentences, but whether he personally accepts it or not is not clear from the manner in which he cites it. Moreover, in his own two more elaborate defences of the prohibition, he adduces the first three of the four grounds we have outlined but says nothing of the biological ground. Nor has the present writer found any further expansion of it in the canonists or in the commentators on St. Thomas up to the nineteenth century. St. Albertus Magnus, St. Thomas' preceptor and colleague, in his elaborate discussion of the causes of sterility seems equally unaware of such supposed results of consanguineous marriage.

In the false capitularies of Benedict Levita (ninth century), we find the statement that clandestine marriages give rise to many sins among those already betrothed to others as well as in the marriages of adulterous, related, and consanguineous mates and that these marriages lead to the birth of "blind, lame, hunchback, blear-eyed, and otherwise defective [*turpius maculis aspersi*] children". But such physiological effects are ascribed by the writer, if I interpret the passage correctly, not to consanguineous marriages alone, but to clandestine marriages including consanguineous ones; and further there is no explicit or implicit indication in the later literature that this passage was known to subsequent medieval writers.

To sum up. Prohibition of near-kin marriage has been, although in varying degrees, consistently maintained in Western civilization from earliest times. The primary albeit not the only grounds

emphasized for the prohibition have been: from Greco-Roman days, reverence and modesty; from the early fifth century, charity; from the thirteenth, domestic chastity; chiefly since the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the biological effects on mates and offspring.¹

Prohibitions of near-kin marriage are, of course, not confined to Occidental or to Christian culture. They are world-wide in distribution, although customary codes regarding the exact kin between whom marriage or carnal relations are prohibited as incestuous differ very widely from people to people and from culture to culture. Among a great many non-Christian peoples, civilized and uncivilized, the prohibitions extend less widely than among us; among other peoples, more widely. But we know of no people that enforces no prohibitions at all. While in the present paper we are speaking primarily of marriage, we may remark in passing that in practically all cultures the same prohibitions apply to incestuous sex relations outside of marriage as to incestuous marriage itself.

The prohibition of marriage between mother and son appears to be universal, that between father and daughter practically so. We have occasional records of alleged permission of father-daughter marriage, but most if not all such instances rest on evidence that leaves much to be desired.

Likewise, the prohibition of uterine brother-sister marriage is almost universal among the peoples of the world. There are rare exceptions to this rule, these exceptions in nearly all cases being confined to marriages between members of the same royal or aristocratic family. The most outstanding historic example of permitted brother-sister marriage is that of the ruling families of ancient Egypt, among whom we find a good many cases of marriage between offspring of the same mother. Among the later Inca rulers of Peru, we also meet with cases of brother-sister marriage. Certain other cases are reported from elsewhere,—such as Persia and the Hawaiian Islands. But, all in all, peoples among whom even royal families were permitted to intermarry so closely can be counted on the fingers of one's hands. Where such close inbreed-

¹ The foregoing review of grounds briefly summarizes a longer paper by the present writer that has been accepted for publication in a forthcoming number of *The Ecclesiastical Review*. The reader is referred thereto for details and full references omitted here.

ing was resorted to among royal or aristocratic families, the more common purpose has been to keep the royal or aristocratic blood pure from the taint of plebeian blood.

Not infrequently we encounter records in our ethnological field reports of individual delinquent fathers or mothers marrying or living in incestuous union with their offspring,—this among peoples who sternly frown upon such unions. In these cases, however, we have to do, not with prevalent social codes, but with delinquencies committed by individuals contrary to and in spite of the code. For instance, the northern Algonquian and Athapaskan peoples of North America are strongly opposed to such unions. Nevertheless individual cases thereof have been reported by reliable writers such as Hearne, Harmon, and McLean.² In fact, nearly anywhere in the primitive world one may come across such exceptional individual delinquents, just as we may come across them in our own Occidental culture.

Even, however, regarding the exceptional recorded cases of accepted permissions of uterine brother-sister marriages or of individual parent-offspring unions entered into in spite of current tribal codes prohibiting them, it is usually advisable to scrutinize the evidence critically before accepting it at face value. The charge of incest is a very common "international slander" of a stripe with much of our own familiar war propaganda. Again, the observer may be mistaken in his interpretation. For instance, John Byron states that the Chono or Chilotan chief, who served as his guide back to civilization after his shipwreck in 1741 on the southern Chilean coast, was married to his own daughter. This statement is often repeated on Byron's authority, but, from what we know of the ethnology of this southern Chilean region Byron was almost certainly guilty of an erroneous inference. It is very likely that in the case Byron gives as in many other such cases cited as incestuous parent-offspring unions, the unions have been in real-

² S. Hearne, *A journey from Prince of Wales's Fort* (London, 1795), repr., Toronto, 1911, 161; D. W. Harmon, *A journal of voyages and travels in the interior of North America*, repr., N. Y., 1903, 46, 131, 257; John M'Lean, *Notes of a twenty-five years' service in the Hudson's Bay territory*, London, 1849, i, 188; cf. other instances cited in E. Westermarck, *The history of human marriage*, 5th rev. ed., 3 vols., N. Y., 1922, ii, 199-201.

ity marriages of a man with a woman and with her daughter by a previous marriage.³

Among a great many peoples, there are fewer restrictions on marriage of kin than there are in our own civilization. The marriage, for instance, of half-brothers and half-sisters was at least tolerated among the very early Jews and among the Greeks of classic times. Among many or perhaps most non-Christian peoples, impediments to marriage arising from affinity, rather than from consanguinity, do not exist, although we do find among many primitive peoples certain prohibitions against marriage or carnal relations between in-laws.

Among a very great number of peoples, first cousins are perfectly free to marry. In fact, first-cousin marriage is very frequently looked upon as a preferred type of mating, or custom may make such first-cousin marriages mildly or rigidly obligatory. In this connection a word may be added regarding the distinction frequently drawn between the marriage of parallel cousins, that is, cousins who are children of two brothers or of two sisters, and that of cross-cousins, that is, cousins who are children of a brother and a sister. A good many peoples who prohibit the marriage of parallel cousins permit, prefer or enjoin cross-cousin marriage.

Among a great many non-Christian peoples, civilized as well as uncivilized, the prohibitions against near-kin marriage are appreciably or markedly more extensive than in our own Western culture. Among some peoples, such, for instance, as some of the Bantu tribes of South Africa, marriage is prohibited to all relatives between whom relationship can be traced, no matter how remote that relationship may be. Some of the northwestern Athabaskan Indians appear to have prohibited marriage up to the fifth and sixth generation. The Choctaws of our own Southeast seemingly prohibited the marriages of those related within four degrees, and permitted marriages of fifth cousins only in cases where it could be proven there was nobody more distantly related who would make a suitable partner.⁴ Further very extensive prohibitions ob-

³ John Byron, *The narrative of the Honourable...* (Loss of the Wager), 2d ed., London, 1768, 136; bull. 63, Bur. Amer. ethnol., 76, 165.

⁴ G. McC. Theal, *Ethnography and condition of South Africa before A. D. 1505*, 2d rev. ed., London, 1919, 261; Dudley Kidd, *The essential Kafir*, 2d ed., London, 1925, 211; É. Petitot, *Autour du Grand Lac des Esclaves*,

tained or obtain among almost all of the primitive peoples who had or have the unilateral kinship groupings known as clans, gentes, sibs, moieties, or phratries. The further discussion however of this related but complicated sib problem would carry us too far afield.⁵

In China we have an instance of a taboo of wide extension on marriage between individuals having the same surname. These surnames are limited in theory at least, to a hundred. It is as if all Smiths, Browns, or Joneses among us were prohibited from marrying Smiths, Browns and Joneses respectively, quite regardless of whether any blood relationship could be traced or not. A somewhat similar prohibition is found in parts of southeastern Africa.⁶

Apart from marriage restrictions proper, a great many peoples have avoidance customs which appear, in some cases at least, to be genetically related to incest prohibitions. A son-in-law is not allowed to look at or to speak to his mother-in-law, and vice versa: a father-in-law may likewise be prohibited from speaking to his daughter-in-law, and vice versa. In some primitive cultures, brothers and sisters, after they have reached the age of puberty or even prior to this period, are not allowed to sleep under the same parental roof, or to eat together, or to speak to each other, or to touch hands or even the tips of their fingers.⁷ For instance, the American introduction of our "Victorian" dances among the school children in some still pagan parts of the Mountain Province of Luzon in the Philippine Islands where these brother-sister avoidances are in vogue, at first caused serious embarrassment and even scandal, because school-age brothers and sisters had to clasp hands momentarily during the dances. Many of these avoidances have probably arisen from causes other than the incest taboo, but

Paris, 1891, 289; J. R. Swanton, *Source material for the social and ceremonial life of the Choctaw Indians*, bull. 103, Bur. Amer. ethnol., Washington, 1931, 135.

⁵ For classic study of facts and interpretations of sib organization, see R. W. Lowie, *Primitive society*, N. Y., 1920, ch. vi-vii, 111-85.

⁶ D. H. Kulp, *Country life in South China*, N. Y., 1925, 166-68; Theal, l. c., 259-60; Kidd, l. c., 211.

⁷ For summary treatment of avoidance facts and interpretation, see Lowie, l. c., 84-107.

some of them are almost certainly extensions of the basic taboo on incestuous marriage and sex relations.

The sanctions back of the prohibitions on near-kin marriage in non-Christian cultures are sometimes religious, but more commonly social. Sometimes these prohibitions are looked upon as implicit or explicit behests of supernatural beings or of a Supreme Deity. More commonly, however, they seem to have purely human and social sanctions back of them. Such social sanctions or attitudes range all the way from mild or sharp ridicule and chaffing, to serious condemnation, to sternest reprobation, to deepest horror. A very common penalty, inflicted by tribal authority and thoroughly approved by public opinion, is death. Such capital punishment not infrequently takes very striking and drastic forms, these forms themselves betokening a deep emotional horror of the crime, a feeling comparable in a measure to our own Occidental horror of "atrocities" like cannibalism. We may illustrate the point by the following three instances chosen from many.

The Tuscarora Indians, who occupied a large part of North Carolina, were forbidden to marry relatives as near as first cousins. They were, however, permitted to marry two sisters or a deceased brother's widow. If, however, an Indian had been guilty of incestuous relations with his own sister or with any other very close relative, he was put to death, his body was burned, and the ashes were thrown into the river as unworthy to remain on earth.

The Dusuns, an ordinarily mild-mannered, kindly, rice-farming people of North Borneo, "never marry till the sixth degree". Incest among near relatives was punished by death. Those guilty of incest in the first degree were tied naked to a large piece of light wood and were thrown into the river. The current carried them down stream, but death did not usually overtake them until after some hours. Those guilty of incest in the second degree were bound and thrown together into the river where they were soon drowned.

Another equally mild-mannered people, the Kayans of the same Island of Borneo, among whom almost all offences are punished by fines only, regard incest as the most serious of all crimes, and have been accustomed to inflict on those guilty of incest the following penalties which speak eloquently of the popular abhorrence of incest. If the guilt of the incestuous delinquents is proven, they

are thrown together upon the ground on the river bank, and a sharpened bamboo stake is driven through their bodies, pinning them to the ground. The bamboo takes root and grows, and the mouldering bodies and bleached skeletons remain, conspicuously visible to every passerby, in *perpetuam rei memoriam*. The other Kayan method of dealing with incestuous delinquents is to shut them up in a strong wicker cage and to throw them into the river. In addition, certain purificatory rites must be gone through. Incest is believed to bring grave peril to the whole community, especially the peril of starvation from crop failures. It may be added that the forms of incest more commonly committed,—though incest in any form is reported to be very infrequent,—are connections of a man with his adopted daughter and those involving father and daughter, brother and sister, and brother and half-sister. The relationship however, between a youth and his sister-by-adoption or between a young girl and her brother-by-adoption does not constitute a bar to marriage.⁸

The foregoing is a very brief and summary survey of the facts regarding incest prohibitions and the sanctions therefor that are found among the peoples of the world outside of our own Occidental culture.⁹ We may now pass on to the consideration of the factors that are responsible for the facts. Incidentally, we shall endeavor to determine to what extent, the real factors, so far as we can divine them, coincide with or differ from the grounds brought forward in defence of near-kin prohibitions. It is not within the province of anthropology to pass judgment on the ethical validity of these grounds. Anthropology feels that it can do its best service by steering clear of judgments of value. The critical evaluation of the grounds comes rather within the scope of the ethicist. Anthropology can, however, consistently with its objectives and limitations, investigate the extent to which the grounds correspond with or differ from the real factors.

⁸ John Lawson, *The history of Carolina*, London, 1718, 186; J. Staal, *The Dusuns of North Borneo*, in *Anthropos*, 1923-24, xviii-xix, 975; C. Hose and W. McDougall, *The pagan tribes of Borneo*, 2 vols., London, 1912, ii, 196-98.

⁹ A fairly extensive survey of the ethnological facts on incest prohibition as outlined summarily in the preceding pages may be found in Westermarck, l. c., ii, ch. xix, 82-161.

We may further premise that the determination of the real factors involved is a task fraught with many difficulties. We cannot hope, in the present state of our evidence, to arrive at any but provisional or probable conclusions. After all, as regards the determination of real factors in general, cultural anthropology is in about the same predicament as other social sciences find themselves. It is very easy, for instance, to outline the events of the Great War. It is equally easy to outline the grounds brought forward by the respective nations for their entrance into and prosecution of the war. It is quite another matter to determine with clearness and certainty the ultimate real factors or causes that brought about the war. We can determine with all reasonable clearness the main actual events in the rise and spread of the modern industrial revolution. But just what factors brought about its germination, or at least its flowering, at a given place, England, and at a given time, the second half of the eighteenth century, can be determined only with greater or less probability. We have an all-too-definite knowledge of the salient facts of our present world-wide financial depression. But there seems to be little agreement, even among professional economists, as to the exact factors that have been responsible for the depression.

In attempting to account for the rise, maintenance and development of incest prohibitions, we cannot hope to reach rigidly demonstrated conclusions. At most we can attain to reasonable plausibility or to greater or lesser probability.

Some of the earlier, nineteenth-century theories of the origin of incest prohibitions started from the assumption of primitive widespread female infanticide and marriage by capture. As a result of female infanticide, there would have been a scarcity of women within the tribe or family, and consequently the men would have been obliged to seek mates outside their own familial or tribal group. As a result of the capture of women in war, and of their subsequent marriage with the victors, the custom of taking women outside one's own group would have developed, and in the course of time would have crystallized into taboos against taking wives from one's own group. These theories are associated chiefly with the names of McLennan, Spencer and Lubbock. Another theory, that of Atkinson, had it that in the beginning the old males kept all the women for themselves and jealously drove away all

the young males, thus obliging these last to seek wives outside the circle of the family or tribe.

All of these theories have gone by the board. For one reason, female infanticide and especially marriage by capture are not nearly as common among primitive peoples as the proponents of the theories assumed. As for the Atkinson fur-seal type of human family dominated by the jealous old males, it just does not exist among primitive peoples and we have no shred of scientific evidence that it ever prevailed. And there are other fatal objections which are reviewed in easily accessible works like those of Westermarck and Briffault.¹⁰ Today these theories are held by no anthropologist of standing.

Recently Briffault has attempted to re-galvanize the long since defunct matriarchal theory, the theory maintaining that the primitive human "family" group was made up of the mothers and offspring and that the mothers or women were the real controlling forces in society. On this assumption, he argues that maternal jealousy, together with the desire to maintain this type of female authority, were responsible for forcing the young males to seek mates outside the family circle.¹¹

Unfortunately for the theory, primitive society, as we know it, presents no such picture of maternal family or of matriarchal control. Briffault's own reconstruction is based chiefly on speculation, although the enormous bulk of his three great volumes and the multitude of citations therein from the literature might easily give the impression to the casual reader that the speculations are closely related to the facts assembled. The theory cannot, so far as anthropologists can see, be reconciled with an overwhelming mass of facts which are omitted from Briffault's work,—above all the great outstanding fact that the bi-parental non-matriarchal family, constituting an economic and domestic unit, is found everywhere in primitive culture, even among the lowliest tribes. So far as anthropology can read the facts, the bi-parental human family is historically and geographically universal, and goes back to the earliest prehistoric period to which our evidence carries us.¹²

¹⁰ For summary outline of various theories, see E. C. Parsons, *The family*, N. Y., 1906, 172-75; for more lengthy exposition and critiques, see Westermarck, l. c., ii, 162-239, and R. Briffault, *The mothers*, 3 vols., N. Y., 1927, i, ch. vi, 195-267.

¹¹ Briffault, l. c., i, 200-3, 249-59.

¹² Cf. PRIMITIVE MAN, July-Oct., 1930, iii, 63, 65-68.

So much in brief for the explanations of the incest taboo that are based on older, but now discarded, assumptions regarding primitive familial and tribal life. Let us turn to evidence that gives fairer promise. A review of the grounds one by one can conveniently serve as an approach, and will at the same time bring into relief the extent to which ethical grounds and historical factors appear to agree and disagree.

Outbreeding has been defended pretty consistently in our Western culture since the days of classic Greece and Rome as demanded by the respect and modesty due between near relatives. Has this consideration been a factor in the establishment and growth of the prehistoric world-wide incest taboo as such? It is hard to say, as our evidence is somewhat intangible and elusive. But even though it were much stronger, we should still have to inquire into the factors responsible in turn for such feelings between near kin.

Has the social ground been a real factor? Have primitive peoples purposely sought tribal or inter-family amity and unity through the prohibition of intratribal or near-kin unions? Again, our facts are not such as permit of a confident affirmative answer. Yet, we have certain scattered indications¹³ that, here and there at least, such a conscious social purpose has operated to some extent in the maintenance,—or perhaps even in the establishment,—of the taboos. Such indications are, however, so few that it seems safer, given the present paucity of our evidence, to conclude provisionally that this particular social consideration has played at best a minor rôle in the origin and development of incest prohibitions.

What of the biological ground? Morgan suggested, as had Buffon more than a century earlier, that the prohibitions came about in early times as a reaction to the harmful consequences seen to result from near-kin marriages. It is true that a number of primitive peoples do believe that many evil effects follow upon near-kin marriage,—effects upon mates and offspring as well as upon society at large.¹⁴ To give just one concrete illustration: a good many of the coastal Bantu in southeast Africa, who them-

¹³ Cf. E. B. Tylor, On a method of investigating the development of institutions, in *Jour. Anthr. inst.*, 1888, xviii, 266-68; Westermarck, ii, 76.

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¹⁴ L. H. Morgan, *Ancient society*, N. Y., 1877, 69, 424; Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, vol. iv, Paris, 1753, 221-22; Westermarck, l. c., ii, 170-79.

selves never marry near relatives look with horror upon some of the neighboring inland peoples who do, and they attribute to this practice "the insanity and idiocy which in recent times have become prevalent among the inland tribes".¹⁵ Many peoples believe that incestuous marriage or intercourse brings in its train failure of crops and other grave evils affecting the welfare of the whole tribe.

It seems more than likely, however, that these native views are in the main rationalizations to defend a custom already established rather than objective factors that originally led to the establishment of the custom. Most of the evil results,—such as crop failures,—can, of course, have no possible relationship to the inbreeding as such. Then too, evils such as these peoples conceive as arising from consanguineous marriage are often equally conceived as arising from many other sorts of conduct looked upon as unethical or criminal from the native standpoint. Furthermore, Buffon's theory does not explain why such a great number of peoples, even those prohibiting parent-offspring and brother-sister marriage, permit, approve, or enforce first-cousin marriage or look without disfavor upon unions of other very close kin, such as uncle-niece, aunt-nephew, or half-sibling unions. Nor does it explain why so many tribes prohibit the marriage of parallel cousins while admitting or insisting upon the marriage of cross cousins.

Even our biological facts, in the present state of our evidence, are by no means as clear as they appeared to many to be a couple of generations ago. So far as our present knowledge goes, we have no tangible evidence that the marriage of near kin leads to sterility. As for defect in the offspring of consanguineous marriages, the situation is a little more complicated. If the family stock be sound, that is, free from both dominant and recessive hereditary defects, the offspring of unions between members of the stock should, in accordance with the Mendelian laws, be sound. If, however, there be recessive defects in the stock, inbreeding between close relatives belonging to the stock is very apt to bring these defects to the surface in the offspring.¹⁶

¹⁵ Theal, l. c., 261.

¹⁶ Cf., e. g., H. S. Jennings, *The biological basis of human nature*, N. Y., 1930, ch. i, esp. pp. 21-22 and 29-31, and pp. 235-37.

It is, of course, not impossible that primitive peoples, with no knowledge of Mendelian laws, or of the unmasking of recessive defects in obedience thereto, may have observed in the past such actual defects in offspring from near-kin marriage. But such defects would probably have been, if not sporadic, at least far from widespread or universal, whereas the taboo on near-kin marriage is universal. Again, experience of such defects might conceivably bring about an unfavorable social attitude toward near-kin marriage, but it could hardly account for the extraordinarily deep emotional horror that is more commonly felt on the part of primitive peoples toward breaches of the taboo.

All things considered, while biological effects upon offspring may have been early observed and while this may have been a contributing factor in the maintenance or even in the establishment of near-kin prohibitions, it seems unlikely that this consideration has been a primary factor leading either to the origin or to the development of incest prohibitions.

The ground that appears to have been most emphasized in Occidental culture since the early Middle Ages is: Given the close proximity and promiscuity in which the members of a family or kinship group must live and be reared, there would be grave hazard of loose sex relations within the family or kinship circle, were there not a rigid prohibition of marriage and of all thought of marriage between very close relatives. Has this ground been a real factor as well?

From our vast accumulations of factual material, one very broad generalization seems to emerge with all reasonable clearness. It is this: Generally speaking, between the prohibitions of near-kin marriage on the one hand and, on the other, common living and rearing under the same roof or in intimate promiscuity, there is a very high factual correlation. Taking both civilized and primitive cultures as a whole, the prohibition of kinship marriage is largely coterminous with living and being reared together either as housemates or in other close association. This fact of close living and rearing together seems to stand out as a sort of least common denominator underlying the world-wide phenomenon of kinship taboo and it is seemingly the only significant and consistent concomitant of the taboo. Is this correlation a casual or a causal one? The fact of its universality suggests, although it does not of course

logically prove, that there is a causal relation between the two facts or sets of facts and that the inbreeding prohibition has arisen in some manner out of the necessarily close association of near kin. This interpretation seems appreciably corroborated by two related and more specific series of facts.

First, to an appreciable extent at least,—even though very far from universally,—the following rule seems to hold: The wider the kinship circle that lives and is reared under the same roof or in close and promiscuous association, the more extensive are the relationships or kinship “degrees” that come under the incest regulations. To give just one illustration: the bands of African *negrillos* who have been described by Le Roy, and who live and wander about in small family groups, permit marriage between nearly any relatives outside of the immediate family circle of the father, mother, sons, and daughters who constitute the bulk of each group. On the other hand, the neighboring village-dwelling Negro tribes look with deep aversion upon the first-cousin and uncle-niece unions they observe among these *negrillos*.¹⁷ We do not, of course, mean to imply that the correlation between extent of proximity in rearing and extent of tabooed degrees works out either universally or by rule of thumb. There does, however, seem to be considerable evidence pointing to such correlation among a good many peoples.

A second bit of corroborative evidence is the fact that although affinity or relationship by marriage more commonly involves little or no incest prohibition among primitive peoples, it does so in quite a number of cases where in-laws live under the same roof. A recent example has been given by Father O'Donnell for the Ibo. “In the same family compound will live three or four generations of kin by blood and marriage,—the great grandfather, grandfather, and so forth. Sex relations within the family compound,—between either blood relatives or in-laws,—were punishable with death in olden times”.¹⁸

Given this basic factual correlation between communal living and incest taboos, two theories of origin suggest themselves or have been suggested.

¹⁷ A. Le Roy, *Les pygmées*, Tours, n.d. [1905ca] 210-11, 224-26; other examples cited in Westermarck, l.c., ii, 207-13.

¹⁸ W. E. O'Donnell, *Religion and morality among the Ibo of Southern Nigeria*, in *PRIMITIVE MAN*, Oct., 1931, iv, 59.

The first of these theories holds that, where the two sexes live or are reared in close daily proximity there tends to arise a certain sex callousness, if not aversion. This would be particularly the case among brothers and sisters who from earliest years are accustomed to associate in a relationship that has little or nothing to do with marriage or sex, and who on arriving at sexual maturity would tend to drift along in the same non-sexual relationship. As Bentham expressed it: "Individuals, accustomed to be seen and to be known from the age which is incapable of conceiving or inspiring desire, will be seen with the same eyes to the end of life. . . . The affections have taken another course; they are, so to speak, a river which has dug its own bed, and which cannot change it". As regards parent and offspring, the powerful drive of the parental impulses and emotions would tend to expel or keep at bay the quite differently tinged inter-sex emotions associated with mating.¹⁹

That such relative acquired—not instinctive or inherited—callousness does tend often to develop among those who from earliest years have been closely associated, whether within or without the family circle, and that strong non-sexual emotions and attitudes such as the parental do tend to forestall or to expel the specific mating emotions and attitudes, appears to be pretty well proven by a great many facts of every-day experience. But such effects result with nothing even remotely like infallibility.²⁰ Innumerable exceptions occur both within family and kinship circles and between those who have been closely associated from early years.

There seem to be no cogent reasons for brushing aside these two related factors as of minor consequence. On the other hand, these factors do not appear to explain satisfactorily a major proportion of our facts regarding near-kin marriage. Such acquired callousness or the expulsive power of parental emotions could easily, by a process familiar to culture historians and sociologists, give rise to customs having the force of law. But it is hard to see how such factors could produce such markedly strong emotional

¹⁹ Westermarck, l. c., ii, 192-218; Jeremy Bentham, "Principles of the civil code," pt. iii, ch. v, in *Works*, ed. J. Bowring, Edinburgh, 1843, i, 351; L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in evolution*, 2d rev. ed., London, 1908, i, 147-49. Westermarck emphasizes more the deadening effect of close association; Hobhouse, the prevention or expulsion of sexual emotions by the parental.

²⁰ Westermarck, l. c., ii, 192-95; Briffault, l. c., i, 203-4, 243-49.

attitudes on the part of practically all primitive peoples toward breaches of accepted incest taboos. We refer in particular, to the deep horror and aversion manifested in their attitudes and crystallized in the Draconian penalties inflicted upon delinquents. Some examples of these penalties have been given above. We appear forced then by the evidence to search farther afield for another factor or for other factors.

May the ethical ground that is basic in our Occidental culture give a clue to the solution of the problem? Is it probable or improbable that primitive peoples feel or have felt that, were there no taboos on near-kin marriage, a good deal of loose sexual conduct would occur in family and kinship circles? Have we evidence of such a feeling among primitive peoples today? Further, can we assume that, given their conviction of such a hazard, they have such an ethical or social outlook as would lead to the establishment or enforcement of the taboos? That Freud has perhaps exaggerated this factor in family life and in kinship taboos as the all-powerful one, should not blind us to the possibility that it may be an important one.

Are primitive peoples aware of possible hazards to sex morality within the family or kinship circle? Certainly it is hard to give any other interpretation to some at least of the avoidances,—the rather elaborate ones, for instance, between brothers and sisters, of which we have given an example or two earlier in the present paper. Some evidences of the same awareness appear to stand out even in some other types of avoidances. The writer was told last summer by the Gros Ventres of Montana a bit of traditional folklore that attributes their current mother-in-law avoidance to an ancient case of immorality between a mother-in-law and her son-in-law. Naturally one does not need to take such tribal tradition as actual history. But it does give indication of the fact that primitive peoples may well feel that there are possible hazards of immorality among kin and housemates.

Given consciousness of such sex hazards, would primitive peoples be sufficiently concerned about sex morality in the home to enforce incest taboos? There appears to be good reason for thinking that most of them would be.

While there is no doubt a great deal of premarital and post-marital looseness among a vast number of primitive peoples, on

the other hand among a very large number great care is taken to inculcate and to preserve standards of morality among the unmarried and married not very unlike those upheld,—even if by no means always followed,—in our own Western culture.

Again even with many peoples among whom rather wide sex-liberty prevails among the general run of the young, there are apt to be many families who are extremely careful of the morals of their growing offspring. As random illustrations we may cite, for instance, the Melanesian data given us by Codrington or the Cheyenne woman whose highly illuminating autobiography has just been published by Michelson; and the present writer remembers coming across a very striking case of the same kind some years ago, among a pagan Gitksan group in British Columbia.²¹

Further evidence of a similar social outlook among primitive peoples is the frequency with which one meets the tribal provision that, if an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, her paramour is expected or practically obliged to marry her,—seemingly lest the child or mother or both be left as a charge and burden on the community. It would not be difficult to give other indications of a widespread and fairly definite consciousness among even very primitive peoples of the more obvious bearings of loose sex conduct, whether within or without the family circle, upon social welfare, and of their concern, notwithstanding very frequent great looseness, for the maintenance of standards of extra-marital conduct not so unlike those more commonly defended in our own culture.

The assumption therefore that a concern for chastity within the family circle has in all probability been one of the real factors in the establishment and development of incest taboos appears to rest on reasonably solid ground. It may be added that this interpretation does account, very largely at least, for the highly charged emotional elements that enter into most primitive peoples' attitude towards breaches of the incest taboo.

Given pretty widespread, though non-instinctive, sex callousness, resulting from early or close association and from checking of the mating impulses by the parental and kindred emotions, social regu-

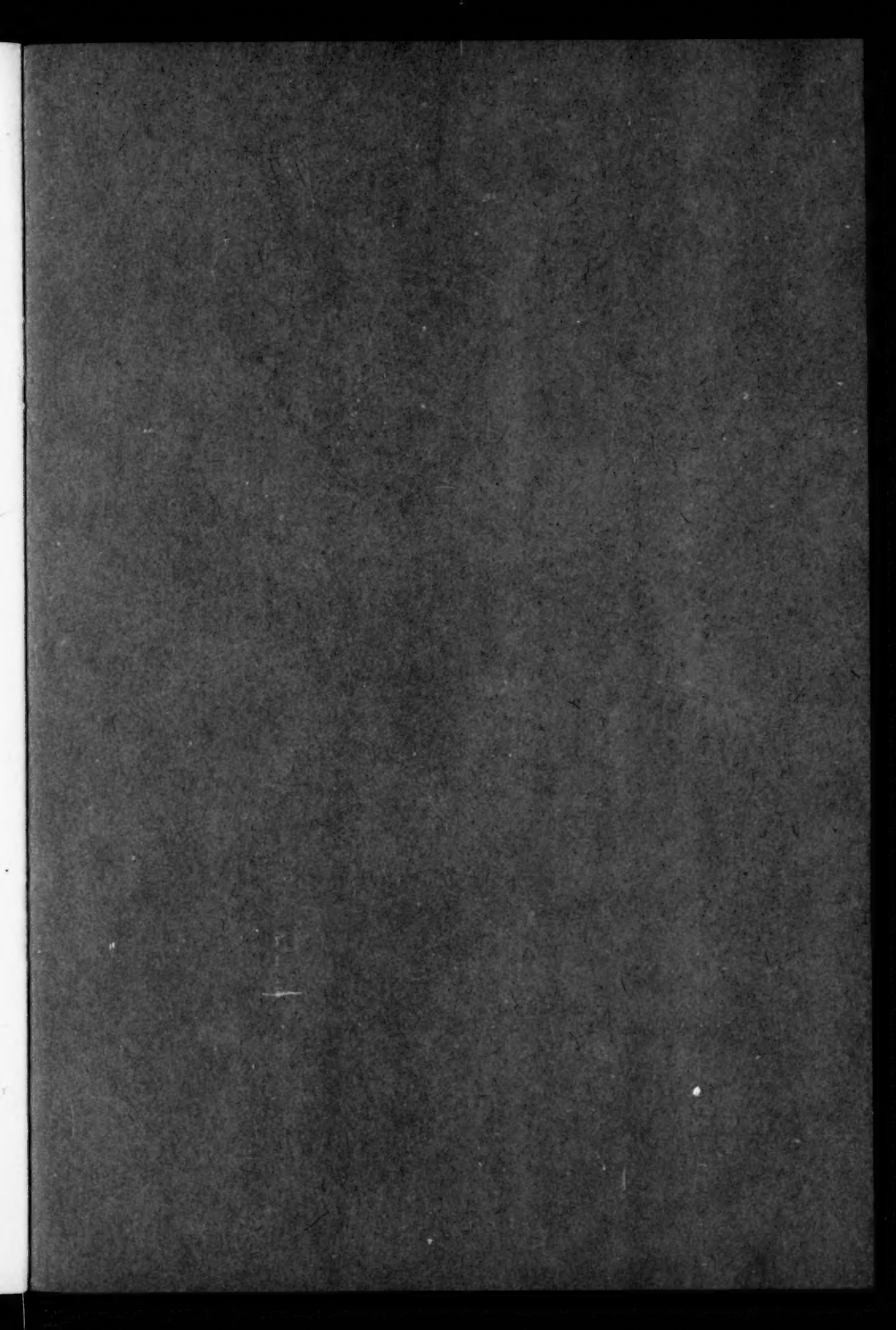
²¹ R. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians*, Oxford, 1891, 235-37; T. Michelson, *The narrative of a southern Cheyenne woman*, Smithsonian misc. coll., v. 87, no. 5, Washington, 1932, 4-5.

lation had an excellent chance to be effective,—just, for example, as, given widespread, though non-instinctive, filial regard, social regulations against such parricide as is considered criminal, have been and are rarely broken. We do not mean to infer that social regulation has singlehanded brought about the pretty rigid fidelity to incest codes that we find. Neither deliberate social purpose alone nor acquired callousness alone would account for the universality of incest prohibitions, for the strong emotional reactions to and rigorous punishments of their infraction, and for the comparatively high fidelity with which the prohibitions have been and are in actual life lived up to. The two factors have worked together, and the social factor has probably been further reinforced, to some extent at least, by considerations, reviewed above, based on a desire to multiply social bonds and to avoid defects in offspring.

The conclusions we are proposing then as to the factors that have been responsible for incest prohibitions may be summed up as follows. The sense of reverence and modesty as due to one's close relatives and the desire to multiply the social bonds, have in all probability not been important factors. Biological considerations may have had something to do with the development of the taboos, but have probably played, at most, a minor rôle. There appears to be no strictly instinctive aversion among human beings to near-kin mating, just as there appears to be none among animals. The chief factors have probably been: (a) sex callousness, resulting from early and intimate association and from the checking or expulsion of the mating impulses by the parental and kindred emotions; (b) the distinctly social purpose of preserving standards of sex decency within the family and kinship circle.

These conclusions are offered in no dogmatic spirit. They are instead offered very tentatively. They appear to account best for the facts that we have. Other factors than those we have advanced, and perhaps important factors, may well be and may well have been operative. Perhaps further facts or further analysis of the facts we already have will some day give us demonstrative proof where today we must be satisfied with probabilities.²²

²² No bibliography is being appended to the present paper as the pertinent sources are given *passim* as footnotes to the paper itself. See especially footnotes nos. 1, 8, 9 and 17.



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